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THE LADY OF THE LAKE AND CHIVALRY IN THE  
*LANCELOT-GRAIL CYCLE AND THOMAS MALORY'S MORTE D'ARTHUR*

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term  
2011

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Lady of the Lake as an active chivalric player in the thirteenth century *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* (also known as the *Prose Lancelot*) and in Thomas Malory's fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur*. To study the many codes of chivalry, particularly in regard to women, I use two popular chivalric handbooks from the Middle Ages: Ramon Lull's *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*, Geoffroi de Charny's *Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*.

Traditionally, the roles of women in medieval chivalry are passive, and female characters are depicted as objects to win or to inspire knights to greatness. The Lady of the Lake, I argue, uses her supernatural origins and nature to break with female chivalric conventions and become an instructress of chivalry to King Arthur's knights. As a purely human character, her power would be limited. As a guardian fairy and/or enchantress, the Lady is allowed to exercise more autonomy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special recognition belongs to Dr. Tison Pugh, who gave me a fantastic (and *fun*) job as a research assistant for a year and a half and then agreed to be my thesis advisor. His encyclopedic knowledge of all things medieval and his assistance in helping me improve my academic writing has been invaluable.

Huge thanks go to my thesis committee readers, Dr. Martha Marinara, and Dr. Peter Larson, for their expertise, support, and patience.

Thanks to Jessica Workman-Holland and JayJay Stroup for offering to read my work and never getting irritated at me when I disappeared for weeks at a time.

No writer works alone. So, thanks to Mom and Dad, my sister Katelyn, and my brother Jason for feeding me coffee and cookies while listening to me chatter excitedly or grouse about my work. Thanks to my friends for not letting me turn into a hermit—sometimes you had your work cut out for you. I also owe my manager, Amy, a bottle of good whiskey for her encouragement and willingness to work with my crazy grad student schedule.

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## INTRODUCTION

The lady of the lake is one of the most complicated characters in the Arthurian legend, and she is open to a variety of interpretations. She is pragmatic, heroic, intelligent, compassionate, occasionally homicidal, and a staunch supporter and instructress of chivalric values. Sometimes she is an educated human woman, sometimes Otherworldly. In the two texts I examine, she emerges as a powerful female character, both politically and personally.

Chapter one focuses on different codes of chivalry. Using Ramon Lull's mid-to-late thirteenth century chivalric handbook *The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*, and Geoffroi de Charny's fourteenth century *The Book of Chivalry*, I examine medieval conceptions of knightly chivalry and how women could (or could not) participate in chivalry. Lull marginalizes women's involvement, while Charny holds women in high esteem for encouraging knights to achieve greater prowess.

Chapter two discusses the early thirteenth-century *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, also known as the *Prose Lancelot*, to argue that the Lady of the Lake upsets chivalric conventions by instructing Lancelot in theoretical chivalry. Despite the authors' anxiety about her Otherworldly nature, the Lady is also a guardian fairy, which allows her more latitude than would be granted to a human woman. Although Lancelot is grown and pursuing his knightly adventures, the Lady often watches over him and his chivalric career from afar by sending him her handmaidens with gifts, messages, and advice. Her continuing influence on Lancelot ensures his active pursuit of chivalry and honor—unlike Guinevere, who would prefer he stayed closer to court: “for she did not see how

she could go on living without him, if he ever left court: she would have preferred there to be a little less boldness and less prowess in him” (*Lancelot Grail* v. II: 233). The Lady of the Lake continually sends Lancelot messages exhorting him to pursue chivalry, not idleness.

Chapter three examines Nenyve, Malory’s fifteenth-century damsel of the lake in *Le Morte Darthur*. Malory combines different ideals of chivalry in his work, and Nenyve is only one example of Malory’s experimental chivalry. Unlike her predecessor in the *Lancelot-Grail*, Nenyve is more physically active in chivalry. Less obviously a guardian fairy but still a protective force, she saves King Arthur’s life on three separate occasions, and even aids Guinevere once. Nenyve holds herself to a higher level of chivalry and polices other women who do not behave chivalrously, notably Lady Ettarde and the enchantress Aunowre.

The Lady of the Lake is difficult to neatly categorize. Although she does not act according to the standards of physical chivalry—prowess in combat—she is a theoretical chivalric lady in regards to the other duties and virtues to which knights are supposed to adhere. The Lady of the Lake in both texts exceeds the limitations of female characters as objects of chivalry by becoming an instructress of chivalric values in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, and by modeling a new breed of chivalric lady who holds herself to a higher standard of female chivalry in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.



## CHAPTER 1: CHIVALRY AND WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ARTHURIAN ROMANCE

Medieval chivalry was an institution primarily for men, yet women participated on the fringes of chivalry. In the fourteenth-century Geoffroi de Charny wrote about women's role in chivalry; to him women were integral to the practice of chivalry because they encouraged knights to "set out and put all their efforts into winning renown and great honor where it is to be sought by valiant men; these ladies urge [knights] on to reach beyond any of their earlier aspirations" (Charny 1996, 95). Women typically could not ride to battle except in defense of their lands in the absence of their husbands, but they could participate in chivalry by sending their men out to gain honor.

Although references to chivalric women are few, handbooks on chivalry such as Ramon Lull's *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry* and Geoffroi de Charny's *The Knight's Own Book of Chivalry* outline the type of behaviors a proper chivalric lady should adhere to. Ironically, Christine de Pisan does not discuss female chivalry in *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, but she does outline a kind of female chivalry in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. The Lady of the Lake is a chivalrous lady, but not always in the conventional sense. Her role is more active than simply inspiring knights to fight—she teaches them how to behave according to the ideals of chivalry.

The Lady of the Lake's unique participation in chivalry highlights the struggle of power between the sexes. As a chivalric actor and as an overtly female character deeply involved in a male-dominated world, she is accepted into the chivalric community. Usually when a female character exercises this degree of autonomy, she is

disguised as a man. Once she is found out, she loses all the power she had wielded. An example of this is Silence, the cross-dressing heroine of the *Roman de Silence*.

The Lady of the Lake, by contrast, does not cross-dress but is a recognized and powerful female from the moment readers first meet her in the text. She is an active participant in the arts of chivalry in the texts of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, usually by serving as an instructress of knightly virtue, and as in the case of Malory's damsel of the lake Nenyve, by policing other women who do not behave with honor. However, while the Lady of the Lake's activity in chivalry was acceptable in romance literature, reality consigned women to the margins of the chivalric community.

#### Medieval Chivalry

To discuss the arts of chivalry, it is necessary to separate contemporary notions of medieval chivalry (a fiercely demanding warrior code), from visions of it in the popular imagination (good manners). In his Introduction to Geoffroi de Charny's *Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*, Richard W. Kaeuper claims most modern conceptions of chivalry are actually Victorian, not medieval (2). In actuality, medieval chivalry represents a rigorous warrior code more concerned with superior physical prowess in combat (2). Courtesy was a quality separate of chivalry.

Also, writing about a single code of chivalry would be misleading because more than one code existed. Chivalry did not declare a universal description of behavior and duties: "so powerful a force as chivalry understandably attracted many attempts at

direction and control. The ethos of the laymen who held the swords was of much concern in a society working to find new forms of order” (Kaeuper 2005, 16). Knights were trained for war and violence. Chivalry kept knights from abusing their authority by outlining codes of acceptable behavior to keep them in check.

Chivalric ideals evolved over the span of the medieval period. Constance Brittain Bouchard writes of the importance of considering the evolution of chivalry instead of generalizing it as a whole. Chivalry in the eleventh and twelfth centuries meant nothing more than the warrior codes and physical prowess during war. The virtues and courtly etiquette were attached to a different standard of behavior called courtesy (Bouchard 103). Ideals of chivalry from the later Middle Ages were “a combination of two separate elements, both the warlike abilities the Old French *chevalerie* originally denoted and courtliness. Courtliness or courtesy, it should be stressed, did *not* grow directly out of a warrior ethos, even though it was grafted onto chivalric ideals by the late twelfth century” (Bouchard 110-11, emphasis in original).

The medieval period saw at least three interconnected kinds of chivalry: feudal, religious, and courtly. These categories, while helpful for understanding medieval knighthood in reality and romance, are imperfect. Separating the main chivalric ideals makes chivalry easier to deconstruct, but also makes chivalry easy to oversimplify or generalize. The types of chivalry do not exist alone; each chivalry is interlaced in some way with the others.

Feudal chivalry is perhaps the most well known of the three. The knight who practiced feudal chivalry was expected to embody the qualities of prowess, loyalty,

largesse, and courtesy. Prowess was chief among these qualities: “[t]he knight who lacked prowess, who was not a competent warrior, was of little use to his lord, the church, or a lady. Prowess enabled the knight to fulfill his function in society—without it he was an object of scorn to his contemporaries” (Painter 29). All four qualities are interwoven; on a battlefield prowess is worthless if a man is disloyal or discourteous. Away from the battlefield and in a courtly setting, a knight’s worth “was judged by the lavishness of his hospitality and the magnificence of his gifts” (42). A parsimonious knight was not nearly as well liked politically or personally as the generous knight. Excessive generosity was another way for a knight to gain glory or renown among his peers.

Religious chivalry was a response to some of the perceived problems of feudal chivalry, and was influenced by how medieval clergymen believed knights should conduct themselves. In this ideal, fighting for vainglory, for plunder, and private wars were all decried as unbecoming of a Christian knight. Although examples of good feudal and courtly chivalric knights abound in both reality and romances, the same cannot be written for religious chivalry: “[t]here has been no attempt to describe a perfect knight according to the doctrines of religious chivalry and this task would be essentially impossible. Except for St. Bernard whose words are addressed to the Templars no writer furnishes a complete picture of the ideal knight from a purely ecclesiastical point of view” (Painter 76). Not even Ramon Lull, who, as a knight turned clergyman, wrote one of the most popular handbooks on chivalry in the Middle Ages, held to a wholly ecclesiastical ideal. Generally, he mixed both feudal and religious chivalry together (77).

Religious chivalry was as demanding as the clerical orders, in that knights “upheld the church and the faith against all their foes. They protected the helpless and suppressed the violent. Furthermore, they practiced the Christian virtues and obeyed the commands of the church in every respect” (Painter 84-5). Feudal chivalric knights were loyal to their lords first. It appears the primary difference between feudal and religious chivalry is the differences in loyalty. The knight following religious chivalry was expected to place the Church and its directives above all other loyalties, including the knight’s lords and commanders.

Courtly chivalry is most often associated with women, because women became objects to win with displays of prowess and courtesy. Knights and lords dictated the terms of feudal chivalry. The clergy constructed religious chivalry. Women influenced courtly chivalry and courtly love. The origins of courtly love are murky. One school of thought credits sensual Arabic poetry. Sidney Painter asserts courtly chivalry began with a mid-eleventh century troubadour in the duchy of Aquitaine who dispensed with tales of battle to write a song about a lady’s beauty and virtue hopes of gaining a good meal. Soon after troubadours and gentlemen wanting to win a lady’s favor were writing songs of glowing praise and admiration (111).

Courtly chivalry affected women both positively and negatively. On the one hand, women were exalted as motivators of chivalry because “chivalric qualities were strengthened by the worship of a lady. A man would be a better knight if he loved—in fact it was doubtful whether a man who did not adore a lady could be a true knight” (Painter 113). When women attended jousting events and tourneys, the knights

performed better in order to impress them. Courtly chivalry helped women to gain more worth in the eyes of men: “[w]oman had edged her way into the mind of the feudal male and had elevated and enlarged her place in society as he recognized it. No longer was she merely a child-bearer and lust satisfier—she was the inspirer of prowess” (Painter 143). On the other hand, women had no control over whether they were adored, or by whom. Love and worship did not necessarily have to be mutual (114). An example of such an imbalance is the affair of Lady Ettarde and Sir Pelleas in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Pelleas was dogged in his attempts to win the Lady Ettarde’s love although she made clear the fact his attentions were unwelcome.

Authors of romance literature also used their adventures of knights, damsels, and adventure to define the chivalric ideal. Chrétien de Troyes, known as the father of chivalric romance, presented his ideals of chivalry in his work, particularly in regard to *Yvain: The Knight with the Lion*, in which de Troyes “presents the transformation of the knight into his ideal. A young hero who begins with the common knightly values (including pride, vainglory, and revenge for shamed kindred) learns to use his great capacity in arms for socially useful purposes” (Kaeuper 2005, 17). Chrétien de Troyes was not alone in his search for a chivalric ideal. The author(s) of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* were similarly conflicted, presenting different ideas of chivalry in different sections of the cycle (Kaeuper 2005, 17).

In *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, Richard Kaeuper discusses knightly violence as a prevalent fear in the Central and High Middle Ages (the Central Middle Ages start in the eleventh century). He uses chivalric romances as evidence of

public fears about knights abusing their powers: "Examining [romance] literature puts us in touch with a vast store of relevant human experience; moreover, it obviously attempts to shape attitudes. No simple mirror reflecting society, it is itself an active social force, identifying basic issues, asking probing questions, sometimes suggesting constructive change" (22). Finding a chivalric ideal to use as a role model placed restrictions on the knights' behavior. Knights were wealthy, powerful, and trained for violence. Romances of flawed knights learning chivalry could inspire knights to emulate their heroes. Although several chivalric ideals existed, the fact they were reflected and elevated in romances highlights not only the need for heroes, but also the quest to find and portray such heroes.

The Lady of the Lake in both the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and the *Morte Darthur* is helpful in examining chivalric ideals. The twelfth-century Lady is an advocate for religious chivalry. Her teachings highlight the knight's duty to the Church as most important: "knighthood was established to defend the Holy Church, for the Church cannot take up arms to avenge herself or return harm for harm; and this is why knights were created: to protect the one who turns the other cheek when the first has been hit" (*Lancelot-Grail* v. II: 59). By following the tradition of anthropomorphizing the Church as a lady, the Lady of the Lake reinforces her point on two levels: all chivalric knights should serve and protect helpless women and the Church. The Lady characterizes the Church as both.

The office of chivalry demands a lot of fortitude and strength from knights. Ramon Lull (c. 1232-1316), Geoffroi de Charny (c. 1306-1356), and Christine de Pizan (c. 1367-1405)

wrote treatises on the subject of chivalry and knighthood, outlining the qualities and conduct both becoming and unbecoming of a knight.

#### Medieval Chivalric Handbooks

According to Sidney Painter, no one knows how popular Ramon Lull's *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry* was when he wrote it in the late thirteenth century, but "by the fifteenth century it had become the standard handbook of chivalry" (77). Lull wrote the original version of his handbook in his native Catalan. In the years after, it was translated into French. William Caxton, who also edited Malory's *Morte Darthur*, translated one of the versions of *The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry* from French into English and presented it to King Richard III, thus placing Lull's work "in a dominant position among the sources used by later English writers on the subject" (Painter 77).

Lull's work blends concepts of feudal and religious chivalry. His writing has credibility because of his experience as a knight in his youth and his turn to the religious life when he was older: "even his great work on chivalry comes out of a scholarly study and from a time when he had left the practice of knighthood to become a quasi-friar" (Kaeuper 2005, 3). In addition, Lull appears to use more than his own experience as a knight for his writing; Dorsey Armstrong draws connections between Lull's work and the French *Prose Lancelot*, specifically in regards to the lecture the Lady of the Lake gives Lancelot about the office of knighthood and the meaning of weapons (Armstrong 79). The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* was written between c. 1215-1235, too early for Lull's handbook. Yet there are structural and textual similarities between the Lady of the



Lake's lecture and Lull's work, suggesting Lull used the lecture as source material for *The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*.

Regardless of his sources, Lull insists on specific virtues for his ideal chivalric knight: "Justice, Wisdom, Charity, Loyalty, Verity, Humility, Strength, Hope, Swiftmess, and all other virtues touch the soul" (30). Lull's *The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry* functions as a training manual for squires pursuing the knightly office. Combining storytelling with advice, Lull's book is eight chapters in length and provides a creation story of chivalry, the duties of the knight, the education of squires, the symbolism of equipment and weaponry, and how others should treat the knights (Lull 3).

According to Richard Kaeuper, two themes remain consistent in Lull's work. The first theme is the importance of both the knighthood and priesthood, particularly in relation to each other (Kaeuper 1996, 25). The second theme pervading Lull's work is his worry about the practicality of knighthood in the world. Power corrupts, and Lull frets that knights would abuse their office. His ideal knight is a hero; the reality Lull fears is that knights would devolve into bullies or predators: "The knights of his day, [Lull] thinks, are wolves watching the sheep. Significantly, his ideal knighting ceremony ends with a ride through town so that the new knight will henceforth be known and therefore less inclined to evil" (Kaeuper 1996, 27). Lull's fear is warranted, according to Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Until the three quests resulting in the Pentecostal Oath, Arthur's Round Table "may have been established as a protective force, but it is unable to monitor itself" (Kaufman 59). Until Nenyve, the damsel of the lake, arrives in King Arthur's court, the

Knights of the Round Table do not adhere as strictly to the code of chivalry as they should, particularly in regard to the treatment and protection of women.

Beyond instructing knights on chivalry, Lull's secondary goal was to reform the chivalric education system. The career path of the knight was practical and traditionally learned by physical practice, but Lull "wanted the knowledge that was requisite for a knight reduced to writing so that aspirants could study it in schools of chivalry" (Painter 81). Lull believed in establishing a book curriculum to teach the theoretical aspects of chivalry. Some aspects of the knight's training, such as horseback riding and use of arms obviously could not be reduced to a book; however, what I consider the "theoretical" aspects of chivalry—including virtues, etiquette, history of chivalry, knightly duties, and even the knighting ceremony—could be written down for instructive purposes. Lull's ideal chivalry, in short, involves literacy.

Throughout the first book of his text, Lull tells the story of a squire who wants to become a knight meeting a hermit. The hermit gives the squire a book, saying:

"[t]he Rule and the order of chivalry is written in this little book that I hold here in my hands, in which I read, and am busy with sometimes, to the end that it makes me remember or think on the grace and bounty that God has given and done to me in this world, because I am honored and maintained with all my power in the order of chivalry" (Lull 11).

Afterward, the hermit gives the squire the book, and charges him with the task of taking it to court, making copies of it to share with anyone else interested in becoming a knight, and returning after his knighthood to report on the success of the book (12-13). Knights

were trained practically, and not all of them were literate. Lull wanted to teach knights to read so they could learn the theoretical aspects of chivalry from his book. Such schooling would take away any deniability if a knight abused his power; ideally he would have studied Lull's work and be familiar with the virtues of chivalry. Lull advocated transparency to keep knights honest.

If Ramon Lull sought to reform chivalry, Geoffroi de Charny felt an even more acute sense of urgency. In his youth he saw the famed order of the Knights Templar destroyed on charges of immorality and heresy, and as an adult he saw the French army, once the fiercest body of fighting men, soundly defeated by the English (Kaeuper 1996, 49). The modern mind may not view the breakdown of feudal chivalry as a crisis, but considering the depth chivalry was integrated into French society, Charny and his sovereign, King Jean II of Valois, possibly felt as though their world was in danger of unraveling as knights lost their prowess and loyalty to both the king and the knightly orders. Thus in his treatise, Charny provides a comprehensive look at hierarchies of honor, the duties expected of knights and lords, practical advice for young knights to succeed, moral standards, and even the role of women played in chivalry.

Malory's *Nenyve* follows feudal chivalry. Feudal knights served their lords above all. Although she is not a knight, the damsel of the lake comes to the aid of King Arthur by saving his life three times, and she saves Guinevere's reputation once. Nothing is known about Malory's *Ladies of the Lake*, so any claims about the Ladies' allegiances or governing would be pure speculation. However, *Nenyve* proves to be a fierce protector of King Arthur, at least from the malevolent intentions of other enchantresses.

Geoffroi de Charny lived according to the principles of chivalry he recommended for other knights. An accomplished military commander and diplomat, Charny died the noblest death a knight could hope for: bearing the oriflamme into the midst of battle and defending the French King Jean II from English forces (Kaeuper 1996, 17). Charny's work is one of the most practical of the chivalric handbooks. He does not romanticize the life of chivalry.

*The Book of Chivalry* is one of the vernacular books on the subject, because it was written in a language and manner knights would best understand (Kaeuper 1996, 23). Charny provides his readers with a description of the duties knights are responsible for, as well as advice for career advancement and romance. He provides a full psychological profile of the kind of man the knighthood requires, and holds knights to a high standard in every aspect of their conduct (Kaeuper 1996, 109). He follows a primarily feudal form of chivalry, but also includes elements of religious and courtly chivalry as well.

#### Chivalry and Women

For Lull, women are unwelcome and unsuited to the arts of chivalry, beyond existing as objects for knights to protect, win, or woo. His dismissal of women is absolute: "In as much as a man has more wit and understanding and is of a stronger nature than a woman...then a man by his nature is more appareled to have noble courage and to be better than the woman" (Lull 18). The idea of allowing women an active role in chivalry repulses Lull, as he has a small section that directly addresses

those who wonder whether or not women could make good knights. The answer is a resounding no:

“By the things before said you might choose women to be knights, they who often have the mirror in the hand, by which [action] you should diminish and make low the order of chivalry in so much that only vile women or only vilany of heart might come to be put into the right high honor of the order of chivalry.” (50)

For Lull, admitting women into the ranks of knighthood would destroy the order of chivalry. Their inherent moral and physical weakness and vanity makes women unacceptable to the profession.

Geoffroi de Charny's *Book of Chivalry* may have been one of the most well known and practical guides used to instruct knights, but his book also addresses the ways in which women may participate in chivalry. Charny disagrees with Lull's disregard of women and holds women in high esteem: “one should indeed honor, serve, and truly love these noble ladies...who inspire men to great achievement...Hence all men-at-arms are rightly bound to protect and defend the honor of all ladies against all those who would threaten it by word or deed” (95). This idea of protecting ladies is reminiscent of the Pentecostal Oath of the *Morte Darthur* that required Arthur's knights to protect women's rights. Women cannot participate directly in chivalry, but in Charny's worldview he welcomes their involvement as inspirations.

Charny discusses a proper chivalric woman's appearance. According to him, the proper chivalric lady is to wear fine clothes and jewelry and present herself in the most

stately, respectable manner possible. His reasoning is pragmatic: first, women who comport themselves as such have a better chance at making an advantageous marriage. Secondly, women are unable to gain glory and acclaim by riding into battle or performing other feats of arms like men, so by presenting themselves as virtuous beauties women can gain a measure of their own honor (Charny 193). Furthermore, Charny also believes women are integral to a knight's honor and prowess:

And [the men-at-arms] are so fortunate that their ladies themselves, from the great honor and superb qualities that reside in them, do not want to let them tarry nor delay in any way the winning of that honor to be achieved by deeds of arms, and advise them on this and then command them to set out and put all their efforts into winning renown and great honor where it is to be sought by valiant men; these ladies urge them on to reach beyond any of their earlier aspirations. (95)

Women may be unable to ride to battle and gain honor as knights do, but they encourage their lovers to pursue chivalry. When a knight gains honor, so does his lady; conversely, if he loses honor, so does his lady by association (121). Winning and retaining a lady's love helps knights remain active in their chivalric office: "it is thanks to such ladies that men become good knights" (95). Without women participating in chivalry, knights would not be as motivated to achieve greatness. Women, it seems, functioned both as the stick that keeps the plow horse moving forward, and the carrot used to reward good behavior.

### Women and Warfare

Contrary to popular belief, women were neither helpless nor useless. The wife of a lord often took care of administrative duties while her husband was abroad in the service of the king: “in the absence of her husband, the lady was no mere valuable chattel in the care of his military or administrative deputies but the actual mistress of the castle and the fief. In both history and romance ladies appear directing the defense of their strongholds against besieging hosts” (Painter 106). In other words, when her husband was gone, the men-at-arms and administrative clerks answered to her in his stead.

Beyond a lady's normal duties, she was expected to be efficient in estate management, ransom collection in the event of her husband's capture in battle, and defense of her lands. According to Rowena Archer, the need to defend against potential usurpers occurred with sufficient regularity that Christine de Pisan included a chapter on the matter in her instruction manual for women (160).

Christine de Pisan's *The Treasure of the City of Ladies, or, The Book of the Three Virtues*, is an instruction manual for noblewomen. In the absence of her husband, the lady is to take his place as the head of household. Part of a man's duties when he was home included bearing arms to protect his lands. When he was away on court business or war, he expected his wife to be capable of safeguarding his lands and people. Pisan recognizes the necessity of women to engage in warfare in certain situations, especially in instances when a lady was protecting her holdings and her children. She includes a section on combat in her manual about what is appropriate for baronesses to know and do:

We have also said that she ought to have the heart of a man, that is, she ought to know how to use weapons and be familiar with everything that pertains to them, so that she may be ready to command her men if the need arises. She should know how to launch an attack or to defend against one, if the situation calls for it. She should take care that her fortresses are well garrisoned. If she is in any doubt about undertaking any course of action, she should sound out her people and find out what they think, rather than do too much on her own initiative. She should consider what manpower she has and can call upon with confidence if the situation warrants it. (129).

In short, women were to familiarize themselves with at least the basic hand-to-hand combat techniques and tactical maneuvers. By having the “heart of a man” the lady of the house became a general, managing not just a household but an army as well. Pisan, aware of the delicacy of women’s place in politics, also counsels princesses and queens to be ready and willing to go to war on behalf of her children in the event of her husband’s death. Although Pisan considers violence a last resort because of the cost in lives and resources, if a queen’s kingdom is in danger of attack by enemies or from civil strife from within, the queen must remain diplomatic to keep the favor of her subjects and army and go to war (82). The queen’s best weapon was not a sword or lance, but her ability to persuade her subjects and allies to battle on her behalf.

Many stories exist of valiant ladies who effectively held their lands against assaults. One such example is Agnes, countess of Dunbar, who maintained her castle



for nineteen weeks of siege and combat until her enemies finally gave up (Archer 160). More uncommon were the true stories of women who commanded armies or engaged in combat themselves. The few women who did “are often compared to Amazons and are usually mentioned primarily as examples of ‘believe-it-or-not’ marvels, which fascinated medieval people more than us...the concept, if not the reality, of women in the military was widespread” (Blythe 245). The absence of men during campaigns or business ventures required their wives to be capable of commanding men-at-arms to repel opportunistic usurpers.

The *Lancelot-Grail's* Lady of the Lake never engages in combat or has to defend her lands against enemies. Ninianne's lands are safely concealed beneath the illusion of the Lake and few outsiders of the Lake even know who she is. Geographically, she resides close to King Ban's realms, because he dies of grief on a hill near her Lake while watching his last fortress burn (v. II: 7-8). It is beside the Lake where Lancelot's mother leaves him while she grieves for her husband. The Lake, while apparently located in a central place and not far from strife, remains a safe haven from the politics and warfare of the rest of the world. The Lady guards her anonymity carefully out of concern for the welfare of the children she protects.

Although the Lady never needs to defend her lands, clues in the text reveal her capability of defense. She admits her wealth in land, and appears to also possess a small army of her own. Christine de Pisan, writing centuries after the *Lancelot-Grail*, believed women should be able to defend her land and children. The Lady of the Lake, arguing her suitability as a guardian of Lionel and Bors tells the lord of Payerne:

“I have undertaken to defend and protect them from all their foes; and there is no reason for them to leave me and go away with you as I have two or three more fortresses where they can feel quite safe from Claudas’ power. It’s time for you to leave now. You may tell all those who care about the boys’ welfare that they are safe and sound, among good friends and perfectly comfortable.” (v. II: 46).

During the same outing, the text lists the Lady’s entourage, including “her lover and two other knights, all fully armed; besides there were as many as thirty squires and men-at-arms” (v. II: 45). She is clearly the one in command and expecting trouble to bring so many men with her when she meets with Leonce of Payerne to assure him of the children’s safety, because she frightens Leonce’s messenger. The Lady’s lover is mentioned but not named or described, and she consistently manages politics and diplomacy whenever necessary.

#### The Lady of the Lake and Chivalry

Leaving reality and returning to romance literature, the fictional women seem to take more active roles in chivalry and politics. The Lady of the Lake is not alone in her singular behavior, although her indistinct Otherworldly nature affords her more freedoms than a normal woman would ever be allowed. In the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Ninianne is not only fiercely independent; she is the ruling power of her lands beneath the Lake. The *Lancelot-Grail’s* Lady of the Lake also possesses far more fairy qualities than human. Fairy mistresses and enchantresses seem to be a law unto themselves. Even in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, Nenyve stretches the boundaries of the concept of the ideal

chivalric lady further by acting as a policing force for knights and women who do not behave chivalrously.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, a universal code of chivalry did not exist; instead “there were many local codes of chivalry. France and England had different political structures, with weak and strong kings respectively, and the codes of behavior that grew up for nobles varied accordingly” (Hodges 3). Political bodies and knights may have preferred feudal chivalry, the clergy advocated religious chivalry, and ladies were enamored with courtly chivalry. According to Kenneth Hodges, Malory did not subscribe to any particular type of chivalry, but seemed willing to experiment:

If Arthur’s court had stood for one set of static chivalric values, Camelot would have faded as those values became obsolete [...] But Malory drew together the varying strands of the Arthurian legend without forcing all the various knightly virtues into one creed, and the result is a depiction of a king and his knights searching for and struggling over what chivalry should be (10).

In the *Morte Darthur*, then, Nenyve as active chivalric lady would be another facet of Malory’s search for chivalry. Nenyve may not engage in combat like a man—she is content to allow the men to handle all the major violence—but Malory’s damsel of the lake is more than capable of defending herself and consistently comes to aid the defense of those who need her.

In the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, the Otherworldly Lady of the Lake is a more domestic chivalric lady. Malory’s Nenyve appears to prefer traveling the countryside instead

of remaining at home, but Ninianne spends most of her time comfortably ensconced in her lands beneath the lake illusion, only emerging when she is needed elsewhere. However, Ninianne is far from a figurehead. Instruction of a young man in the arts of chivalry was traditionally considered a man's job. A boy would often be sent to another household to work his way up the ranks to a knight under the tutelage of an experienced knight. After an altercation between Lancelot and his male tutor, the Lady of the Lake assumes the responsibility of teaching him the virtues of chivalry herself.

Both the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and the *Morte Darthur* were fundamentally concerned with chivalry, perhaps above any other issue. The authors of each respective work joined and reflected the current discussions of their times. In a way, these works represent a quest for chivalry. It is likely that each respective work had an influence on the debate.

The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* reflects different ideals of chivalry from book to book. Ramon Lull likely found inspiration from the Lady of the Lake's lecture to Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Grail*, as his description of knightly arms and virtues are similar (Armstrong 79). Both Malory and Charny also drew inspiration and material from the *Lancelot-Grail* to use for their own works concerning chivalric values (80). The Lady of the Lake influences more than just romance literature; she instructs the fictional Lancelot du Lac, but also reaches Lull and Charny, two of the most well-known medieval authorities of the arts of chivalry.

## CHAPTER 2: NINIANNE: THE CHIVALRIC INSTRUCTRESS OF THE LANCELOT GRAIL CYCLE

In chivalry, women are typically passive observers, but the Lady of the Lake upsets conventions of chivalric instruction by taking personal responsibility for Lancelot's education and introduction into the wider chivalric community of King Arthur's court. To mold Lancelot into the ideal knight, the Lady must step outside of the restrictive parameters of female roles in chivalry.

To accomplish her task of teaching Lancelot the tenets of chivalry, the Lady of the Lake blends her roles of guardian fairy and fairy instructress. When Lancelot turns eighteen, the Lady realizes she must let him go so he may become a proper knight—Guinevere's knight. Ninianne acknowledges that she cannot explain everything of chivalry to him for she lacks understanding of some aspects (v. II: 59). Technically, this is true. The text never suggests the Lady of the Lake or any of her maidens were proficient with arms or other physical knightly pursuits, but she instructs Lancelot on the theoretical aspects of chivalry: manners, virtues, and duties to the church.

### Evidence for the Lady's Fairy Nature

Ninianne, the Lady of the Lake, is a singular lady. The first time she is seen in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, she is a nameless maiden who kidnaps Lancelot before his mother's eyes by leaping into the enchanted Lake with him and disappearing. After this startling introduction, the author of the text goes to great lengths to assure the reader of the Lady of the Lake's love and care for Lancelot:

Once she had him [in the Lake] there is no question that he was very dear to her, for she took care of him more tenderly than any other woman could who had not actually given birth to him. She was not alone, but surrounded by knights and ladies and maidens; and she found the child a wetnurse who was very good to him. When he was weaned, he was given a tutor, who taught him proper behavior...Lancelot thus stayed in the care of the young lady for three years, living in great comfort and firmly believing that she was his mother. (v. II: 12)

Still, the reasons behind Lancelot's kidnapping are unclear. He was not a true orphan; his father died, but his mother still lived. Perhaps the answer lies in her nature. A human woman stealing another woman's child would be reprehensible. However, a fairy stealing a human child was more acceptable.

In Celtic lore, fairies were neither cute nor harmless. They were powerful, untrustworthy, utterly terrifying creatures of magic best avoided. Women and children were the most common victims of fairy abduction. Women were abducted because fairy women were unable to nurse their own children, so they required a human wet-nurse (Campbell 19). Some stories of fairy kidnapping involve changelings: the fairy would take the human child and leave her own in its place. However, a mother could protect her children if she remained vigilant and kept her wits about her (Campbell 45). Finally, fairies, the mercurial creatures they were, occasionally took children they deemed neglected in order to protect them from harm.

With even this superficial understanding of fairies, the Lady of the Lake's character begins to make sense. Lancelot's father dies shortly after his kingdom was taken from him. His mother, overwhelmed from losing her home and husband, succumbed to grief: "she tore at her beautiful blond hair; she ripped her clothes and threw tatters to the ground; she clawed at her delicate face until red blood ran down her cheeks...She swooned and mourned in turns" (v. II: 8). While she grieved, the queen left Lancelot alone beneath a tree and forgot about him until a long while later. When she returned to the place where she had left him, terrified at the thought of him having been trampled by horses in her absence, the queen found Lancelot alive and well with a beautiful young lady. Seeing the queen's approach and hearing the queen say her son's days would be filled with sorrow and poverty, the Lady of the Lake leapt into the Lake with the child. Between the mother's lapse in concentration, lack of engaging wit, and neglect, the Lady took Lancelot with little trouble. Regardless of the way the situation is read, the Lady of the Lake becomes distinctly Otherworldly. As a fairy, the Lady is granted more power than an ordinary human woman. The archetype of the fairy mistress is often of an independent and wealthy female who chooses her own lover.

Further evidence of the Lady of the Lake's fairy status is her orchestrated kidnapping/rescue of two more children, Lancelot's cousins Lionel and Bors. In this instance, she uses a modified version of the changeling to complete the ruse. Lionel and Bors are being held captive by King Claudas. The Lady sends her most trusted handmaiden, Saraïde, to rebuke Claudas by accusing him publicly of child abuse:

“You are basely holding the two sons of King Bors of Gaunes in prison, though everyone knows for a fact that they have done you no harm. Nor can you deny your cruelty, for no creature has a greater need for tenderness and compassion than a child, and no one can claim to have kindness in his heart who is cruel or grudging toward a child...You must know that there is no place on earth where, hearing of the way you guard King Bors’s children, people are not convinced that you plan in the end to kill them; and there is no one of any compassion who does not sincerely hate you for it, even if you have never done him any wrong.” (v. II: 26).

The lengthy rebuke makes Claudas appear to prey on children, so in order to clear his name, he orders the children released from their prison and brought to the feast, to show the court the princes are well and alive. In the ensuing fracas, the maiden takes her two greyhounds and casts an enchantment on them to look like the children, and casts another enchantment to make the children look like greyhounds. Thus disguised, the children are thrown over horses and taken to safety (v. II: 26). While the Lady of the Lake does not personally take these children, she concocts the plan for their escape from King Claudas. The combination of magic and trickery are characteristic of fairies.

Carolyn Larrington examines the natural or supernatural origins of Morgan le Fay and to a lesser extent, the Lady of the Lake. Many of the questions she asks about Morgan can also be applied to the Lady of the Lake, as the Lady’s nature proves as difficult to ascertain as Morgan’s. While Larrington believes Morgan was originally a goddess, she believes the Lady of the Lake was a fairy:



We can, however, confidently ascribe a supernatural origin to the Lady of the Lake, who must originally have been a water fairy, similar to her forerunner in the Swiss-German *Lanzelet*...the water fairy differs from the mermaid in that she has human form; she lives under the water in a courtly environment which differs little from the real world except by virtue of being hidden from it. Even in the earliest versions of the *Lancelot*, the authors are anxious to make clear that the Lady is no longer a supernatural figure. (13).

The authors of the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* indeed call Ninianne a “fairy” and display the anxiety Larrington mentions by immediately providing a definition of the term and attempting to portray her as ultimately human.

Now, according to the story, the damsel who carried Lancelot off into the Lake was a fairy. At that time, the word “fairy” was used for all women who practiced magic, and at that time there were many more of them in Great Britain than in other lands. According to the story in the Breton Chronicles, they knew the powers of words and stones and herbs, which allowed them to retain youth and beauty and enjoy whatever wealth they wished...the woman that the story tells about had learned everything that she knew of sorcery from Merlin, and she practiced it with great skill. (v. II: 11).

While the *Lancelot-Grail* author defines the word “fairy” to mean an educated, female, human magic user, telling the audience the Lady is human and proving her humanity are two different issues entirely. She possesses far too many supernatural

characteristics to remain merely human. The most noticeable of these characteristics, of course, is the Lake. In the first passage, Larrington describes the water fairy as dwelling in a courtly environment identical to a terrestrial court. While the authors in the *Lancelot-Grail* are careful to say the Lake is only an illusion disguising the Lady's lands and forest, the illusion is still a lake—a visual connection to the Otherworld. The Lake provides “a tantalizing mixture of the natural and the supernatural. The Lake has to be inaccessible to ordinary humans without special guidance, for it must provide a safe refuge for Lancelot” (Kennedy 111).

In both the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and in Malory, the Lady of the Lake appears to possess the characteristics of a protective fairy. In her book, Lucy Allen Paton dedicates a majority of her time examining the natures and possible origins of Morgan le Fay and the Dame du Lac, across multiple texts. Of the Lady of the Lake's nature, Paton believes the clue resides in the Lady's title because “the Celtic imagination placed the other world not only beyond the sea, but also beneath the sea” (167). Although the Lake she lives beneath is explained away as a clever enchantment to disguise her lands, the idea of the Otherworld remaining a mystery beyond the reach of uninvited mortals is pervasive.

In the *Lancelot-Grail*, Ninianne functions within the paradigm of the protective fairy as she grooms her young charge for a distinguished chivalric career. In the guardian aspect of her role, she is presented as “the supernatural woman who instructs a young hero in the manly exploits—skill in arms or the chase—that fit him for some special purpose” (Paton 170). However, the Lady of the Lake defies categorization.

Unlike most protective fairies, the Lady is not a mistress to her charges, “be assured that my love for him is only that of a mother for her child” (v. II: 232). Instead, she combines the roles of the fairy mother and the fairy instructress. Likely, this sense of chastity is one of the characteristics allowing the Lady of the Lake to be more successful in her endeavors than Morgan le Fay. Unlike Morgan, the Lady does not kidnap knights and hold them captive for amorous reasons. Instead, she kidnaps children to protect them from harm and mold them into heroes, in the tradition of fairies spiriting away endangered children.

#### The Fairy Instructress

The Lady of the Lake takes her duties as a chivalric instructress seriously. Anne P. Longley draws parallels between the relationship of Merlin and Arthur with that of the Lady of the Lake and Lancelot. Similar to the way Merlin guides Arthur, the Lady of the Lake controls Lancelot’s development into a hero (311). As Longley points out, the Lady of the Lake “takes on a role that was normally reserved for a male figure in the life of a young knight...[Lancelot’s] rejection of the male tutor clears the path for the Lady of the Lake to step in as his sole teacher” (315). Whereas a knight would usually teach Lancelot the art of chivalry, Lancelot, incidentally, does not like or respect his male tutor. After an altercation, Lancelot’s refuses to learn anything more from his tutor and the Lady of the Lake assumes full responsibility for Lancelot’s education, including his education of chivalry. Lancelot, for all of his natural attributes, could not have become

one of the greatest knights in the Arthurian tradition without assistance; the Lady, even with her self-professed limited knowledge of chivalry, guides and encourages him.

The text does not indicate the Lady of the Lake is proficient in arms, but she is well-versed in the ideals of chivalry. The structure and content of her lecture to Lancelot is echoed in later texts, particularly in Ramon Lull's *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*. The *Lancelot-Grail* was written in the early thirteenth century. Lull was born in the early 1230s, approximately at the same time the tale was being finished so Lull was likely familiar with the tales of King Arthur and his knights. Lull was an active, intelligent knight of some renown. When he retired he became a religious scholar who wrote prolifically. According to Brian Price's introduction to the *Book of Knighthood and Chivalry*, Dr. Maurice Keen noticed connections between the chivalric handbook and the Lady of the Lake's lecture to Lancelot in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* (Price n.pag).

The connections between The Book of Knighthood and Chivalry and the Lady of the Lake's chivalric lecture are clear. Although Lull did not appear to hold women in high esteem, he drew material for his handbook from the Lady of the Lake. After quizzing Lancelot on why he wants to become a knight, she tells him a creation story of chivalry. Briefly recounted, when the world started to follow the ways of evil, when "envy and covetousness began to grow in the world and might began to win out over right" (v. II: 59), the people chose the worthiest men to stand as their champions against evil. This story is remarkably similar to Lull's: when the world turned to evil, the people were separated into thousands and each group chose a champion "a man most loyal, most strong, and of noble courage; better educated and mannered than all the others. He

was inquired and searched for, he who was best and was covenably most fair, most courageous, and most able to sustain trials, and the most able to serve mankind” (15). Although no evidence exists to support either version of the chivalric creation myth, the beginning of the Lady’s lecture to Lancelot is mirrored in the beginning of Book Two of Lull’s handbook.

Following the creation myth, the Lady of the Lake explains the symbolism behind each piece of a knight’s gear to Lancelot in detail. The shield signifies the duty of the knight to protect the Church from attack; the hauberk signifies the protection the knight is to give the Church from its enemies; the helmet makes a knight recognizable so as to frighten away evildoers; the lance is likewise to frighten off evildoers, because with it a knight can kill a man at a distance; the sword’s double edge signifies the knight’s duty to be a soldier of both God and the people; the horse signifies the common people the knight protects and governs, like the horse bears the knight, the knight should receive similar support from the people (v. II: 59-60). The knight the Lady of the Lake describes is merely one ideal of many that were circulating during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and an impossible one to adhere to, although she counts Jesus Christ as a knight who embodied all the qualities she describes.

As the Lady of the Lake discusses the weaponry, equipment, and virtues a knight must possess to be successful, Ramon Lull also explains the significance of the knight’s regalia. The sword is reminiscent of the cross, and symbolizes destroying the Church’s enemies and upholding chivalry and justice; the lance signifies truth; the helmet covers the most important part of the body and allows a man to hold his head high instead of

down in shame; the hauberk protects against all manner of vice; the shield represents the knight's duty to stand between his lord and harm; gauntlets provide a last defense against injury and keeps him from touching anything evil (Lull 64-69). Lull's explanations differ from the Lady of the Lake's, yet there are small clues in the text connecting the *Lancelot-Grail* to Lull's handbook.

Both the Lady of the Lake and Lull subscribe to religious chivalry. If feudal chivalry was the secular creation of politics and knights, and courtly chivalry the creation of women, religious chivalry was characterized by obedience to the church: "A true knight must be courageous, hardy, and skilled in the use of arms, for fighting was his function in life. He must obey the commands of the church and use his sword in its defense. Finally, he must serve his prince in defending the state and punishing criminals. His was the might that would enforce the laws of church and state" (Painter 72). Both the Lady of the Lake and Ramon Lull have ecclesiastical leanings.

The Lady of the Lake's lecture has one fascinating—and crucial—omission. She emphasizes the knight's role in protecting justice and the rights of the defenseless, but she "does not mention the relationship between the knight and his lord, a relationship which receives great emphasis in the actual adventures the knights in the romance undertake" (Kennedy 119). The Lady's oversight seems at first to prove her incomplete knowledge of chivalry which she admits to Lancelot "I will describe the qualities [chivalry] takes, then...though not all of them, because I don't have the understanding to describe them all" (v: II: 59). This reading would be inaccurate. Displaying another hint of Otherworldliness as well as a divergence from traditional chivalry, the Lake and the

Lady who governs it are both isolated from the rest of the Arthurian world; the Lake “lies outside the network of feudal relationships and is free from the conflict between rival lords. No feudal terms are used in connection with it; the Lady of the Lake is one of the few visitors to Arthur’s court who claims no allegiance either to anyone or from anyone” (Kennedy 117). The autonomy of the Lady of the Lake explains her brusque treatment of King Arthur when she asks him to make Lancelot a knight (v. II: 63). The Lake’s separation from the rest of the chivalric world also explains why Arthur was puzzled at her name because “most of the lords and ladies in the romance who send messengers or come to court in person are known to him at least by reputation and hold lands which fit into the network of feudal relationships which link Arthur and his allies, or Arthur’s enemies and their allies” (Kennedy 120). The Lady of the Lake is not officially an ally or an enemy of Arthur’s court or any other; her concern is Lancelot’s chivalric career.

The Lady of the Lake’s involvement with Lancelot’s chivalry does not end when she gives him to King Arthur. She takes the time while traveling to teach him how to behave in court and gives him the equipment he needs to fulfill his duties as a knight. Charny wrote of the noble ladies who inspired and encouraged knights on to greatness; the Lady not only coaches Lancelot but, as mentioned above, brazenly informs King Arthur, “If you wish, you will make him a knight; and if you do not wish to do so, I will seek someone else. I will even make him a knight myself if need be” (v. II: 63). Women are integral to Lancelot’s knighting—the Lady of the Lake and Guinevere both ensure his knighthood, the former by insisting on the knighthood and the latter by finishing the ceremony. Lancelot’s knighting ceremony is incomplete because the king did not gird

him with a sword; it is the queen who sends a worthy sword to Lancelot while he is traveling to complete the process (v. II: 71). The Lady's instruction did not include a discussion of the knight-lord relationship, but Lancelot's loyalty is immediately given to Queen Guinevere in a combination of both feudal and courtly chivalry.

The Lady of the Lake is an ever present force in Lancelot's life. While she prefers to remain at home, she sends her maidens to bring Lancelot aid, messages, directional guidance, and advice. The initial insistence on religious chivalry fades and courtly chivalry becomes the focus. The Lady's chivalric instruction did not include courtly love, either. She immediately begins to correct this oversight by sending one of her maidens with a message for him: "you should give your heart to a love that will turn you not into an idle knight but a finer one, for a heart that becomes idle through love loses its daring and therefore cannot attain high things. But he who always strives to better himself and dares to be challenged can attain all high things" (v. II: 84). A knight's honor was built on his prowess; a knight who spent too much time at home risked losing his courage and honor. The Lady took care to remind Lancelot to keep adventuring so he was worthy of the queen's love.

The Lady's lecture to Lancelot might be her most famous speech in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, but it is not the only time she instructs Lancelot on the art of chivalry. Lancelot refuses to learn from his tutor, and after the Lady of the Lake presents him to King Arthur, Arthur gives the eighteen year old Lancelot to Yvain: "Yvain, I am putting you in charge of the lad. No one could teach him how to behave better than you" (v. II: 64). His apprenticeship to Yvain is barely two days as Lancelot follows the Lady's



directive that he be knighted on Sunday. The Lady helps him from afar by sending him advice and shields to improve his prowess.

The *Lancelot-Grail Cycle's* Lady of the Lake is a more detailed instructress of chivalric values and fairy protector of Lancelot than her counterpart in the later *Morte Darthur*. She is less mobile than Nenyve, and less inclined to interfere with politics outside her court, but Ninianne's presence is felt throughout the text. She raises Lancelot, cures Lancelot's madness, sends him shields to improve his physical prowess, and during the early part of his career, she sends him her maidens to relay messages and to guide him.

What Ninianne does have in common with Malory's Nenyve is her independence. Despite the centuries separating the texts, both remain powerful and mysterious enchantresses in the text, even as their relationships to the other characters change. The next chapter will examine Nenyve as an active agent of chivalry in the *Morte Darthur*.

### **CHAPTER 3: NENYVE: THE CHIVALRIC DAMSEL OF MALORY'S *MORTE DARTHUR***

Easily one of the most powerful characters in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, male or female, the damsel of the lake enters the male-dominated political sphere whenever she deems her protection or guidance is warranted. In the *Morte Darthur* women can participate in chivalry, usually as judges of knightly virtue, but Nenyve takes a more active chivalric responsibility. Not simply a judge or a pretty object of chivalric quests, Malory's Otherworldly damsel of the lake serves as a fairy instructress and also models a new kind of female chivalry herself.

Nenyve is an advocate mainly for feudal chivalry, and her participation in the chivalric community helps shape a new chivalric system for men and women. According to Kenneth Hodges, the "chivalric transitions also mark major changes in the roles of women within the text because the codes of chivalry define what a good woman should be as much as they define what a good knight should be" (Hodges 36). Malory's damsel of the lake is a chivalric experiment, a prescription for the small roles traditionally allowed females in romance or reality, and an enforcer of chivalric values in other females.

Like her counterpart Ninianne in the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Nenyve has an Otherworldly aspect which allows her more autonomy. Malory is careful not to comment on her fairy nature, but he does leave clues in the text for the reader to interpret. In *Celtic Goddess: Great Queen or Demon Witch?* Claire French observes that medieval writers enjoy playing games with their audience. Using a popular stylistic device of the Middle Ages called "interlace technique" where themes such as love/hate, or war/peace

were often interwoven, storytellers were trained to hide mythical, ethical, or supernatural motifs in their work. The audience was expected to rely on their own cultural knowledge to understand the references and solve the riddles the authors presented. French likens this narrative technique to mystery fiction, where the author hides clues to the identity of the perpetrator throughout the text (French 16-18).

Evidence of her Otherworldliness is presented the first time she is seen in the text, at the feast of Arthur and Guinevere's wedding. She disrupts Arthur and Guinevere's wedding feast with her hunt of the white hart, also called a stag. Stag hunting had a particular place in Celtic mythology and maintained this connection with the divine even after Christianization: "In the first Christian centuries...legends and hagiography tell of the appearance of a miraculous stag with a crucifix between its antlers, which leads the hunter into paradise, or at least succeeds in converting him to Christianity" (French 30). While the pursuit of the hart does not lead Sir Gawain to paradise, he does learn a valuable lesson about mercy, a core chivalric value. Further, Nenyve's brachet is white (Malory v. I: 102). Malory does not mention whether or not the brachet has red ears; however, "white hounds with red ears are the hunting dogs of Modron, the Great Mother in her manifestation as death goddess" (French 71).

Nenyve never remains idle; her activity in the chivalric community and her duties as a guardian fairy to King Arthur requires her to travel. In at least three of the episodes in which she appears, the damsel of the lake is seen riding through the forest. Sue Ellen Holbrook argues the Ladies of the Lake are associated with more than just water: "woods and (especially intriguingly) stones are as significant and multivalent as water"

(72). Holbrook then notes Nenyve's sylvan traits in various episodes: the disruptive hunt during Arthur and Guinevere's wedding, which gives her woodland connections as a *cacheresse* (huntress); the meeting between her and one of Sir Pelleas' doleful knights in the woods; and the time she rode into the Forest Perilous to help rescue Arthur from Aunowre, the murderous and jilted enchantress (75). Indeed, while Malory often refers to Nenyve as a damsel of the lake, she spends most of her time in the woods; the audience never actually encounters her anywhere near the Lake.

#### The Chivalric Instructress

In *LeMorte Darthur*, Nenyve is responsible for teaching Arthur's knights to be honorable, merciful toward surrendered opponents, and respectful toward women. She brings three quests to Arthur's court to test the king and his knights. Of the three quests, only one is successful while the other two are unmitigated disasters. The outcomes prompt Arthur to require each of his knights to make a yearly Pentecostal Oath:

[He] charged them never to do outeragenothirmorthir, and always to fletreson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, upponpayne of forfeiture [of their] worship and lordship of kyngeArthure for evermore; and always to do ladyes, damsels, and jantilwomen hand wydowes [sucour:] strengthe hem in hir rights, and never to enforce them, upponpayne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarrel for no love ne for no worldisgoodis. (Malory 120)

Nenyve's introduction to Arthur's court comes during his and Guenevere's wedding feast. The damsel of the lake quickly proves herself as intelligent as her deceased predecessor, as the timing of her appearance is not a coincidence—she has the dual task of mending relations between the ladies of the lake and Arthur's court, as well as ensuring the women of Arthur's court are treated with deference by the knights.

This task is accomplished by the challenge of three quests. The lamentable outcome of Gawain's quest wherein he refuses a knight mercy after surrender and accidentally kills the enemy knight's lady, and the death of Pellenore's daughter because of his failure to stop and render aid, both contribute to the vow to protect women's rights and bodies. The only one to succeed in his quest is Sir Tor, who shows deference to a lady's wishes and remains true to a promise he makes her. The Pentecostal vow gives women more power but still bars them from practicing chivalry to gain their own honor: "the oath emphasizes protecting women rather than honoring them for their own deeds" (Hodges 51). With the vow, ladies and maidens can be assured that knights will respect and aid them if necessary.

In "The Law of the Lake: Malory's Sovereign Lady" Amy Kaufman notes that before Nenyve's appearance, Arthur's court values women very little. Arthur's knights have been derelict in their duties to protect women:

Rather than fame and fortune, each knight gains a lesson that the primary duty of knighthood is to provide service to women. Knights are supposed to protect women's bodies and their sovereignty, their freedom of will as well as their freedom to assign their chivalrous protectors as they see fit.

For what the knights learn on their respective quests, after all, is that upholding this bond with women is the key to good knighthood. (59)

Indeed, until Nenyve's intervention in Arthur's court, women's lives and wills were worth as much as a good hunting dog or horse. At least three women were wronged in the text before the appearance of the damsel of the lake. Arthur's mother Igraine was deceived into sleeping with Uther. After he has her husband killed, she is forced to marry Uther, regardless of her personal feelings on the matter. Tor's mother was raped by King Pellennore who then stole her pet greyhound. Lady Lile of Avalon was murdered by Balin in the middle of Arthur's court. Social status meant little; Igraine was an aristocrat, Tor's mother a peasant, and as the chief Lady of the Lake, Lile was certainly a noblewoman of some kind, likely a sovereign authority in her own right. According to Kaufman, Nenyve functions as an emissary from the ladies of the lake to "reorient the king's priorities and reestablish their broken alliance with the court. The Round Table may have been established as a protective force, but it is unable to monitor itself" (59). This inability to self-monitor exemplifies Ramon Lull's fears about the knighthood, and why he focused on promoting chivalric values. Nenyve serves as the catalyst to make the Knights of the Round Table to remember their chivalric responsibilities, particularly regarding women. The Pentecostal Oath Arthur requires his knights to swear annually ensures women will be respected and protected even from the knights themselves, and imposes a penalty to any knight who does not behave with honor.

### The Chivalric Lady

While Malory's damsel of the lake teaches chivalry to knights, she also polices women who behave contrary to the tenets of chivalry as well. In the episode of Pelleas and Ettarde, she punishes what she perceives as chivalric infractions. Of all the types of chivalry accepted at the time, Nenyve believes in practicing feudal chivalry most of all. Although she is not a knight, she does come to King Arthur's aid on at least three separate occasions.

In feudal chivalry, the knight's first priority is protecting his lord or employer. To all appearances, Nenyve's loyalty is to King Arthur, although nothing definitive is known about Malory's ladies of the lake. Unlike the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, which gives a detailed account of the Lady's life, Malory is not interested in giving readers any background information on his ladies of the lake. Still, she has a remarkable amount of personal agency. Nenyve goes wherever she chooses, yet the text never mentions an entourage as would befit a traveling noblewoman. She provides protection to Arthur, his queen, her husband, and a few knights she inexplicably favors, but she does not require protection from any of them in return. The episode in which she is kidnapped from Arthur's court is the one exception. However, considering her behavior during the rest of the book, the kidnapping episode has a staged quality.

Perhaps her independence is owed to her status as an enchantress. Malory does not discuss or hint at whether she is human, but if other versions of the Lady of the Lake hold true, her possession of magic places her in a different category from other women and allows her the freedom to practice a more active type of female chivalry. She may

not engage in combat, but she upholds a more rigorous chivalric standard of behavior and expects other women to do the same.

In her unique type of feudal chivalry, Nenyve is a protector not just of chivalric virtues but also of her chosen sovereign, King Arthur. She guards his life from Accolon, Morgan le Fay, and the enchantress Aunowre. According to Paton, “the Dame du Lac attained prominence as a guardian fay in the Lancelot story and has become so far a type of fairy protectress that her care is made to include Arthur also; and that just as Morgain is regularly associated with malign influences so the Dame du Lac came to be regarded as her foil in incident as well as nature” (Paton 198). Indeed, as soon as she dispatches Merlin, she rides with haste to aid Arthur: “The meanewhyle that they were thus at the batayle com the Damesel of the Lake into the feld...And she com thidir for the love of kynge Arthur, for she knew how Morgan le Fay had ordayned for Arthur sholde have beneslayne that day, and therefore she come to save his lyff” (142). With an enchantment, she helps Arthur retrieve the authentic Excalibur from Morgan’s lover Accolon, and she saves his life again by advising him against wearing the deadly cloak Morgan sent him under the guise of an apology (157).

The conflicts with Accolon and Morgan are well known episodes in the *Morte Darthur*. However, Nenyve protects King Arthur once more. The villainess is the enchantress Aunowre, who loved Arthur but resolved to murder him when she could not seduce him. She finds Sir Trystram and brings him to the Forest Perilous where Aunowre is keeping Arthur captive. When they arrive, they find a single knight beset by two others at the same time, which went against the courteous principles of chivalry:



Proper chivalric behaviour implies not only an attitude to one's fellows but also to the enemy. The notion that all's fair in love and war is a reflexion of modern cynicism, for although a good knight cannot be expected to love his enemy, he will certainly respect him, admire his skill, and never resort to underhand methods. Combat is not a free-for-all; there are rules to obey. (McCarthy 83)

To outnumber and overwhelm a knight was dishonorable. The proper protocol for a chivalrous battle was always one-on-one. The knights attacking Arthur are not behaving chivalrously—because their lack of chivalry is at Aunowre's behest, she is complicit in their dishonor. Nenyve, as an advocate for justice, does not forgive Aunowre's actions.

The Lady of the Lake and Trystram arrive as Arthur is overcome: "And at the lastethes two knyghts smote downe that one knyght, and one of hem unlaced hyshelme, and the lady Aunowre gate kynge Arthurs swerde in her honde to have strykyn of his hede" (v. II: 491). Nenyve never engages in combat. Very few women who fight do so effectively. Morgan le Fay's attempts to murder her husband by the sword are thwarted by her son Yvain, and so Aunowre's attempt to behead Arthur goes awry. Nenyve, for all her chivalric inclinations, is content to leave physical combat to the men. She stands out of the way on the sidelines and allows Trystram and Arthur to do violence at her behest. At one point she commands King Arthur "Latnat that false lady ascape!" (v. II: 491), and he listens by beheading Aunowre. Nenyve picks up Aunowre's severed head and ties it onto her saddle by the hair (v. II: 491). This episode contrasts to the failed quests of Gawain and Pellinore in which women die as a result of a knight's

lack of chivalric values. Instead of Aunowre's head being a sign of chivalric failure, it becomes the lady of the lake's trophy, a sign of another unchivalrous lady's end.

In a world where enchantresses and fairy guardians protect male heroes from a multitude of harms, including the machinations of devious women, Nenyve breaks with tradition by saving Queen Guinevere's reputation after Lancelot saves the queen from the stake. After a lover's quarrel with Lancelot ends with the queen sending him out of the realm, she holds a dinner for twenty-four knights. At the end of the dinner, Sir Patryse suddenly dies of a poisoned apple. Incensed, the knights accuse the queen of murder and appeal to King Arthur for justice. Arthur decides to hold a trial by combat. If the queen cannot find a champion, or if her champion loses the battle to Sir Madore, she will be burnt at the stake. With Lancelot gone, the king tells the queen to appeal to Sir Bors. As Bors was one of the twenty-four knights at the feast, he initially refuses to fight despite her claims to innocence until the king finds the queen kneeling in supplication before Sir Bors and says "A, jantillknyght...have mercy uppon my quene, curteyseknyght, for I am now in sertayne she ys untruly defamed. And therefore, curteyseknyght...promyse her to do batayle for her, I requyre you" (1152). The king orders Sir Bors to fight on behalf of the queen, and the knight grudgingly complies. According to chivalry, and the Pentecostal Oath King Arthur requires of his knights, Bors is honor-bound to battle on behalf of the queen. The day of the appointment arrives, but before Bors is ready, a disguised Lancelot takes the field and defeats Sir Madore.

Trial by combat may clear the queen's name of all wrongdoing, but doubts may remain. As a parallel to contemporary criminal justice, a good defense attorney might

get a jury to vote “not guilty” by creating reasonable doubt, whether or not the accused actually committed the crime. Trial by combat, wherein whoever wins has the hand of God on them and is blameless, has obvious flaws as well. Just because the queen is acquitted does not mean all doubt of guilt vanishes. The Lady of the Lake arrives in court to metaphorically close the case. She has the credibility and power to be heard:

And so hit befelle that the Damesell of the Lake that hyghtNyneve, whych wedded the good knyght sir Pelleas, and so she cam to the courte, for ever she dedgretegoodnes unto kyngeArthure and to all hyskyghtesthorow her sorcery and enchauntmentes. And so whan she herde how the quene was greved for the dethe of sir Patryse, than she told hit opynly that she was never gylty, and there she disclosed by whom hit was done, and named him sir Pynel, and for what cause he ded hit. There hit was opynlyknowyn and disclosed, and so the quene was [excused]. (1059)

Malory’s audience is already aware of the identity of the damsel of the lake, but Malory reiterates her credentials. She is a capable sorceress, a well-respected friend to the king and all his court, and happily married to a knight of great renown. Malory presents Nenyve as a person the entire court would trust. She has also proven herself an advocate for justice in the past, and she maintains that reputation by revealing the identity of the true murderer, thus proving in Malory, that the Lady of the Lake’s guardian status far exceeds the original parameters of her protection of Lancelot.

### Courtly Love and Chivalry

Malory's Nenyve is an active member of the chivalric community. Although she is not a knight, she sets quests before knights to complete, and partakes in her own adventures. Her method of "combat" is not physical but magical, mental, and always indirect. Kaufman professes skepticism that Nenyve was ever in real danger during her abduction from Arthur's court. She believes Nenyve organized her own victimization to test Arthur and his knights, a test the king initially fails when he is glad she is carried off because she was noisy (Kaufman 59).

In *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's Le Morte Darthur*, Kenneth Hodges notices the damsel of the lake's involvement with chivalry: "Nenyve and Morgan act in many ways as knights and lords" (39). During his discussion of Malory's lack of misogyny and women's inclusion in the system of chivalry, Hodges claims: "The sense that women were participants in chivalry, affected by and affecting its developments, is pervasive. Women such as Nenyve who associate with the Round Table (which was widely understood to be a knightly order) must be recognized as participating in knightly culture" (41). Women in the *Morte Darthur* might not be physically combative like the knights are, but they are far from excluded from the practice of chivalry—indeed, noblewomen may function as judges of knightly virtue; show largesse in the form of gift-giving, including rings, swords, and shields; and enchantresses may render aid to knights in the form of healing.

Women are also involved in courtly love, which is connected with courtly chivalry. The damsel of the lake cannot escape courtly love, but Malory upsets chivalric conventions by allowing Nenyve to remain active in chivalry, gain a good mate, and

keep her autonomy: “marriage neither controls nor tames the wild and unpredictable Nynyve, who maintains her sovereignty and her superiority throughout the text” (Kaufman 63). Nenyve has dealings with courtly love when she intervenes in the unrequited love affair of Pelleas and Ettarde, but she adheres to feudal chivalry instead of courtly chivalry.

Courtly love was not spontaneous; it was a very structured dance of wooing and being wooed. The core of the story of Sir Pelleas and Lady Ettarde’s courtship is only marginally dysfunctional in regards to her violent refusal to surrender. As discussed in Chapter One, practitioners of courtly chivalry had a tendency to place noblewomen on a pedestal of worship regardless of their personal wishes: “ladies of troubadour poetry were passive goddesses who were adored whether they wished to be or not...the knight was expected to serve his adored one, this service consisted merely of fidelity and continuous worship. In short troubadour love was not mutual” (Painter 114). In fact, the episode of Pelleas and Ettarde follows closely the standard procedure of courtly love: first, the knight sees a woman of worthy rank and virtue and falls madly in love with her. Then he pines after her for a few months, after which he makes an advance or declaration of love. The lady then rebuffs him, citing the superior virtue he so loves about her. The brokenhearted knight retreats with notions of dying for love, and tries to prove the depth of his worship for his lady by feats of arms and bravery. Finally, the lady will decide he is worthy and the two lovers pledge secret, undying love for each other (Baker 64).

But something has gone wrong with Sir Pelleas and Lady Ettarde. She is unreceptive to his advances, no matter what he does. Pelleas recounts his tale of romantic woe to a sympathetic Gawain, saying:

And so I may never com to hir presence but as I suffirhirknyghtes to take me, and but if I ded so that I might have a sight of hir, I had benedelongear this tyme. And yet, fayreworde had I never none of hir. But whan I am brought toforehir she rebukyth me in the fowlsytmaner; and than they take me my horse and harneyse and puttyth my oute of the yatis, and she wollnatsuffir me to etenotherdrynke. And always I offir me to be her prisoner, but that woll she natsuffir me for I wolde desire no more, what paynes that ever I had, so that I might have a syght of hirdayly. (v. I: 168)

The Lady Ettarde is disinterested in Sir Pelleas, despite his wealth and prowess. Sir Pelleas is an unbeatable competitor in the tournaments he invariably wins for her, his publicly declared sovereign lady. According to Andreas Capellanus' rules of courtly love, rule number thirteen is "When made public love rarely endures" (Capellanus 185). Pelleas is very public about his affections. He allows himself to be arrested by her knights every week just to see her, after which she insults him and refuses him any kind of hospitality before setting him free or throwing him in her dungeon for a brief time. She does not even find his offer to become her prisoner enticing. If anything, she seems to take pleasure in humiliating him as often as possible by having her men "tyehym to his horse tayle, and somtymebyndehymundir the horse bealy" (v. I: 167). Ettarde's

treatment of Pelleas is an extreme example of the dangers of courtly love. As sovereign lady, Ettarde shows no regard for Sir Pelleas, but instead of ignoring him in the hopes that he will lose interest and leave, she deliberately torments him. As her loyal servant, he allows the abuse to continue to prove his fidelity.

When Nenyve, the damsel of the lake, intervenes on behalf of Sir Pelleas, he has already finished the script for his role of the courtly lover and has taken to his bed to die of despair. The Lady Ettarde not only continues to reject his admiration but has been seduced by Sir Gawain instead. Nenyve enters the scene to stop the vicious cycle of courtly love. Sir Pelleas, his unwanted interest aside, has acted the part of the chivalrous lover according to convention. When Pelleas discovers Gawain in bed with Ettarde, he even adheres to the courtesy so important in feudal chivalry when he refuses to kill Gawain in his sleep for seducing Lady Ettarde: "Though this knyght be never so false, I woll never slehysleypyng, for I woll never dystroy the hygheOrdre of Knyghthode" (Malory v. I: 170). Part of courtesy was unwillingness to attack an unarmed or unaware man (Painter 34). Instead, the heartbroken knight leaves his sword across their throats and returns to his own pavilion. Sir Pelleas tells his servants he plans to lie down and die. After he is gone, they are to cut his heart out and bear it to Ettarde (v. I: 170).

Courtly love has reached its limits. Rejected and betrayed by his sovereign lady whom he has repeatedly and publicly debased himself to please, Sir Pelleas has two choices: move on, or pine to death. In the tradition of the ever-faithful courtly lover, he chooses the latter option, but Nenyve, moved by his dashing good looks and empathy

for his woeful tale of unfortunate love, overrules him. In contrast to Pelleas, the Lady Ettarde has not acted chivalrously in her harsh treatment of him. In one of Capellanus' dialogues, the woman says "When she has fully determined not to love a suitor, she should pleasantly and prudently and politely tell him he is rejected, not upset his soul by any rude remark or keep him in suspense by any promise" (133). Malory does not show the reader the beginning of the courtship or mention whether Ettarde had ever tried a gentler method of rejection, but the behavior she displays in the text is considered reprehensible by all. Nenyve steps in to reward Sir Pelleas for his faithfulness, and to punish Ettarde for her unkindness.

However, there is something troubling about this scene. On the surface, the reader may be inclined to approve Nenyve's actions. After all, Sir Pelleas is a paragon of knightly virtue and prowess, and Malory describes Ettarde as the worst kind of shrew for treating such a wealthy, handsome, and accomplished knight so horribly. Nenyve is a rational heroine for immediately recognizing his good qualities and acquiring him for herself.

A reconsideration of the situation in regards to female agency—including the power to reject an unwanted lover—makes Nenyve rather hypocritical. Nenyve herself endured the unwanted advances of Merlin, until she murdered him to be rid of him. Ettarde has undergone a similar long-term romantic siege, yet when her rejection finally has Pelleas declaring his intention to crawl into his bed "making mervelous dole and sorow" (Malory v. I: 171) until he dies, Nenyve condemns her.



However, the true reason for Nenyve's wrath is Ettarde's lack of chivalry—specifically mercy. Sir Gawain had the same issue during his part of the quest Nenyve set before Arthur's court at her introduction. He failed in his quest because he was unmerciful, which caused him to accidentally kill a surrendered opponent's lady. Perhaps it is no surprise that Gawain reappears and plays a role in this episode with Pelleas and Ettarde as well. Beverly Kennedy believes “[w]hat is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, in Malory's opinion. If a ‘kynghtwithoute mercy yswithoute worship’ then a lady without mercy should also be without worship” (77). The damsel of the lake, incensed by the Lady Ettarde's behavior, assures Pelleas' knight “He shall nat dye for love, and she that hath caused hym so to love she shall be in as evylleplyte as he is or hit be longe to, for hit is no joy of suche a proude lady that wollnat have no mercy of suche a valyaunteknyght” (v. I: 171). Women's role in chivalry might be passive, but Nenyve does not seem to consider convention an excuse.

Nenyve holds herself to a chivalric standard, and expects the same of other women. Her murder of Merlin is excused as self defense from Merlin's lechery: “And allwayes he lay aboute to have hirmaydynhode, and she was ever passyngewery of hym and wolde have benedelyverde of hym, for she was aferde of hym for cause he was a devyls son, and she cowde not be skyfte of hym by no meane” (v. I: 126). Malory does not condemn the damsel of the lake for the preservation of her virginity. He describes Merlin as an unrelenting and menacing nuisance: he follows her everywhere and constantly tries to seduce her, although she manages to make him swear never to use magic to take her will (v. I: 125).

Ettarde's disloyalty, lack of generosity, and discourtesy, (all violations of the fundamental tenets of feudal chivalry) are cause enough for Nenyve to mete out punishment. Kennedy further adds infractions of courtly chivalry to Ettarde's sins: "Ettarde must be punished because she has violated the worshipful code of conduct for ladies. She has made a 'starkecowerde' of Pelleas, not by seducing him into luxurious idleness, but by scorning his love so that he was willing to do anything, even to act the coward, just to have a glimpse of her rather than die of grief" (Kennedy 77). As a knight's cowardice was punishable by death, so Ettarde's degradation of Pelleas until he seemed like a coward was unforgivable.

Nenyve's active chivalric involvement further upsets the already dysfunctional romantic relationship. She sees Sir Pelleas and thinks "she sawe never so lykly a knyght" (171). The situation is an odd one: Nenyve desires a man who loves another woman who hates even the sight of him. While the triangle might be strange, the method of resolving the conflict is reminiscent of knightly combat and courting. Knowing she cannot have Pelleas while Lady Ettarde lives, she brings the other woman to his bedside while he sleeps under an enchantment, chides her for murdering him, and then casts another enchantment on Ettarde making her love Pelleas as desperately as he had loved her. This kind of magical combat is subtle. Ettarde is unaware of the enchantment Nenyve has placed on her, and has a disturbing conversation with Nenyve.

'A, LordeJesu,' seyde this lady Ettarde, 'how is his befallyn unto me that I love now that I have hatydmoste of ony man on lyve?'

‘That is the ryghteousejugement of God,’ seyde the damesell. (v. I: 172)

The damsel of the lake passes judgment on Ettarde and essentially enchants Ettarde and Pelleas to trade emotions. As Nenyve promised Pelleas’ faithful knight earlier in the story, Pelleas awakens and hates the Lady Ettarde with the passion she had once hated him, and in turn, Ettarde loves Pelleas as desperately as he had her. Since Pelleas had made up his mind to die for love, the Lady Ettarde takes his place and dies of a magically induced broken heart.

With the exception of Merlin, the damsel of the lake never directly murders another character, but Ettarde’s death is one of at least two instances where Nenyve does not appear completely innocent. Ettarde never really had a chance to defend herself against the proclaimed righteous judgment of God—or Nenyve’s Otherworldliness—but with Ettarde’s death, Nenyve is free to pursue Pelleas. In his role as the wooed and won damsel, he amiably follows her when she says “take your horse and com forthwith oute of this contrey, and ye shall love a lady that woll love you” (172). He marries her only at *her* will; she shows her singular autonomy by choosing her own mate. Throughout the rest of the text, Malory mentions Nenyve and Pelleas several times, and always makes a point to comment on the happiness of their marriage. According to Hodges, the frequent reminders of Nenyve’s happy marriage and tendency to protect her husband from harm provide an indictment of Lancelot and Guinevere’s adultery (59). Nenyve’s winning of Pelleas is appropriate in her chivalric career.

Malory’s damsel of the lake is a force for chivalric change. Chivalry never remained a static concept, but changed according to the political atmosphere. Before

the instatement of the Pentecostal Oath which outlined a new chivalric ideal the Knights of the Round Table were expected to uphold, the chivalry of the *Morte Darthur* needed to be revised. The Oath is imperfect, but “Nyneve is part of a change that places much more importance on women. While the oath emphasizes protecting women rather than on honoring them for their own deeds, Nyneve goes on to have an active career; never again is she merely an object of someone else’s quest” (Hodges 51). Although Nyneve is never the object of another quest and finds adventures of her own, she is not a female knight-errant. She embodies a new female chivalry by enforcing her own will and extending her protections over knights instead of calling on them to protect her, but she lacks the major aspect of feudal chivalry: physical prowess.

Nyneve does not fight, and chivalry is primarily about the arts of war. Instead, she facilitates the knights’ learning to uphold chivalric values through quests and ensures women behave with honor. The damsel of the lake punishes dishonorable, cruel women: she serves as a counterbalance to Morgan le Fay and protects Arthur from Morgan twice, punishes Ettarde’s unmerciful treatment of Pelleas, and again protects Arthur from the machinations of the enchantress Aunowre. Throughout the *Morte Darthur*, she maintains her powers and personal autonomy to eventually become the chief lady of the lake.

## CONCLUSION

Over two and a half centuries and two cultures separate the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*. One aspect that remains similar in both versions of the tales of King Arthur and his knights is the importance of the Lady of the Lake and chivalry. The character does not remain the same; indeed both women possess different names, different relationships, and while Ninianne rarely leaves her home beneath her enchanted lake, the reader never sees Nenyve at home.

In the *Lancelot-Grail*, she takes responsibility for Lancelot's chivalric education. From her he learns manners and the duties a knight should perform. When he is grown and able to go on adventures of his own, the Lady's influence is rarely far away; she sends trusted handmaidens to Lancelot bearing gifts to enhance his prowess, cure his madness, guide his path, offer advice, and to give him messages from the Lady herself. Although the Lady often uses emissaries to advance her agendas, she remains a strong presence in the text, constantly reminding Lancelot of his chivalric duties in a manner later echoed in chivalric instruction handbooks, including Lull's work: "her very lengthy account of what it is to be a knight closely resembles the chivalric manuals of the day, most of all perhaps Ramon Lull's *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, though this itself was written too late to be the actual source that the author of the Prose Lancelot used" (Dean 12). Lull's book might be written approximately fifty years too late for the *Prose Lancelot*, but I believe the Lady's chivalric lecture was a source for Lull.

Malory's Nenyve is no less crafty or intelligent than her predecessor. In fact, Nenyve is more physical than Ninianne in the text. She appears in Arthur's court, travels

the countryside, and on at least three occasions in the text she saves the king's life. Malory experiments with multiple kinds of chivalry: "*Le Morte Darthur* responds to this chivalric diversity by analyzing how different chivalries evolve and interact" (Hodges 3). I consider Nenyve to be an extension of these experiments. By giving Nenyve a more active role in chivalry, not only as an instructress, but also allowing her the freedom of movement to find adventures on her own, she redefines the role of women in chivalry.

The Lady of the Lake is a difficult character to understand. The source texts disagree with each other about her roles, personality, motivations, and nature. She never fits into any character archetypes and rarely possesses a clearly defined purpose scholars can agree upon. Scholars are unable to draw a definitive conclusion about any version of the Lady. For instance, Christopher Dean believes Nenyve was a minor character, so unimportant to Malory that he did not give her a history or indicate "what, if anything, she stands for" (4). Amy Kaufman counters by claiming Nenyve "is Malory's most original creation" (56). In both the *Lancelot-Grail Cycle* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*, the Lady of the Lake remains a mystery.

However, the differences between the two Ladies are superficial. At the core, the Lady of the Lake is a guardian fairy deeply connected to the arts of chivalry. The medieval Lady of the Lake is the unsung heroine of the Arthurian saga. Although she is one of the most well known female characters of the legend, the Lady is often overlooked in favor of Guinevere or Morgan le Fay, both of whom appear more frequently in the texts. Yet, when the Lady appears, she has a specific purpose—to protect someone from harm or to teach. She exercises an unusual amount of autonomy,

and unlike most strong women who marry and lose their power, she maintains her strength throughout the text.

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